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ABSTRACT

To understand the change and development of people's attitudes toward death over the life span, a 62-item attitude questionnaire on death and dying was administered to 90 adults. Participants included five females and five males in each of nine age categories: 18-20, 20-24, 25-29, 30-34, 35-39, 40-49, 50-59, 60-64, and 65 or older. Participants were primarily Protestant, Caucasian, and of higher socioeconomic status. The results showed that only 10 percent of respondents indicated overt death anxiety while 51 percent were death acceptors. Responses indicated ambiguous feelings about death, with females being more open to expressing these ambiguous feelings than were males. Females also reported beliefs in reincarnation and afterlife more than did males. Data analysis revealed that death anxiety had no relationship to age; older respondents had no more death anxiety than did younger respondents. Generational differences were suggested by similar views on religion and drugs expressed by the younger and older cohorts as opposed to the middle-aged cohorts. The results suggest that environmental factors and generational differences are more important than aging in the formulation of adults' views of death. (ABL)

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ATTITUDES TOWARD DEATH ACROSS THE LIFE SPAN: R. Maiden & G. Walker. Alfred University, Alfred NY 14802

To more fully understand how attitudes towards death and dying develop and change across the life span by age (time factors) and by gender, 90 adult volunteer subjects, five males and five females in each age category from 18-20, 20-24, 25-29, 30-34, 35-39, 40-49, 50-59, 60-64 and 65 years or more were administered a 62 item attitude questionnaire on death and dying originally published by Psychology Today and adapted to our purposes. Results revealed that gender differences (socialization) along with generational differences (historical time) were more important than aging (nearness to death) in the formulation of death attitudes. Interaction differences by age and gender about death concerns were also noted. While aging or maturation per se appeared unrelated to death anxiety, females did seem to maintain an ambiguous attitude regarding fear of death throughout the life span while males tended to deny any death anxiety whatsoever. Implications of the impact of acculturation or socialization compared to chronological age in the development of death anxiety are discussed along with suggestions for further research.

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ATTITUDES TOWARD DEATH ACROSS THE LIFE SPAN

To more fully understand how attitudes towards death and dying develop and change across the life span by age (time factors) and by gender, 90 adult volunteer subjects, five males and five females in each category from 18-20, 20-24, 25-29, 30-34, 35-39, 40-49, 50-59, 60-64 and 65 years or more were administered a 62 item attitude questionnaire on death and dying originally published by Psychology Today and adapted to our purposes. Responses to the specific questionnaire items revealed many interesting and significant findings. For example, the orientation towards death item detected little overt death anxiety among the respondents as only 10% said that they were death fearers while 51% said that they were death acceptors. But there were many responses that suggested covert death anxiety as 69% of the respondents wanted to die in old age, 18% would never die, 84% did not wish to know the exact date of their own death, and 68% wished there were an afterlife. These data indicate that many of the subjects may have had an ambiguous attitude toward death, sometimes fearing it and sometimes denying it almost according to the question asked (See Appendix I).

A Chi Square statistical test revealed significant main effects by gender suggested that females more so than males were aware of and open to expressing their ambiguous feelings toward death (See Appendix II). For instance, in males, death was the end of life; females indicated death was the beginning of life after death ($p < .03$, $df = 5$). Further, males tended to doubt the existence of reincarnation but females were more inclined to believe in it ($p < .01$, $df = 5$). Males would prefer to die first and have their spouse outlive

them, females would prefer to die second ($p < .04$, $df = 2$). The reason given for this outcome was that the surviving spouse wished to live as long as she possibly could. Although some researchers have not found gender differences in death anxiety (Conte et al., 1982) others have noted them (Sanders et al., 1980: Florian & Han-Even, 1983-84; Lester, 1972). One researcher (Schulz, 1975) whose study reflected similar differences in death anxiety interpreted her findings this way. She felt the differences were due to socialization. She noted that in our culture males are encouraged to repress their fears; females, to express them. We agree and conclude that these differences reflect the major role socialization plays over biology and maturation in the development and maintenance of overt death fear.

Contrary to popular belief, the results indicated that age when conceptualized as "nearness to death" played no direct significant role in death fear or death attitudes. Those subjects who were most mature tended to have no more death anxiety than those individuals who were younger. Although aging and maturing (nearness to death) appeared to play a significant and anticipated role in the formulation of death attitudes in an earlier study using this scale (Shneidman, 1970), many other researchers reported similar findings to our study that age was not significantly associated with death fears and death concerns (Jeffers, Nichols, & Eisdorfer, 1961; Kastenbaum & Costa, 1977; Pollack, 1980; Swenson, 1961; Templer; 1971; Templer, Ruff & Franks, 1971).

While aging per se seemed to play little systematic role in the subjects' fear of death, the results suggested some significant generational or cohort (historical time) differences in the formulation of attitudes towards death

and dying via religious views and perhaps drug use experinces. For example, the results revealed that subjects said religion had "a very significant role" in the formulation of attitudes toward death for people age 20-24, 60-64 and 65 or more ($p < .09$, $df = 32$). Further, subjects of ages 18-20, 50-59, 60-64 and 65 or more said their attitudes toward death had not been affected by narcotic or hallucinogenic drugs because they had never taken drugs ($p < .002$, $df = 16$). These findings indicated that in some cases there may be a curvilinear relationship between age and attitude formation. The older cohorts tended to be more similar to the younger cohorts than to the middle-aged ones (30-50) in their formulation of their death concerns(See Appendix III). As no published study that we are aware of has systematically sampled different age populations across the entire adult life span regarding death attitudes, these generational and cohort differences in formulating death concerns represent a rare finding in the literature and they need to be replicated. However, they do fit in with recent findings surveying the beliefs and feelings of our younger generation that they are becoming more conservative in their attitudes and behavior (Yankelovich, 1981) towards drug usage, sexuality and religiousity.

Besides the main effects of gender and generational differences, there were the following significant interaction effects. If one could choose when one died, females age 20-24 years would never die ($p < .03$, $df = 2$). The predominant reason males age 30-34 would have wanted to die was for emotional pain; females of the same age indicated the reason was embarrassment ($p < .05$, $df = 2$). Males age 65 or more have never seriously contemplated suicide, which is interesting as they are generally considered the highest risk group

for suicide as they are 4 to 5 times more likely than any other age group to take their own life. Yet, females of the same age have considered it as a option once in a while ($p < .07$, $df = 2$). Another finding revealed elderly men tended to prefer burial, but elderly women preferred cremation ($p < .04$, $df = 2$). While these interaction effects are based on a small N they are nevertheless interesting to note.

It should be noted that our sample primarily came from a rural academic community, were primarily Protestant and Caucasian (96.7), and tended to represent a higher socioeconomic level of achievement and education than the general population (See Appendix IV). Also our subjects constituted too small of a sample to be representative of the general American attitude towards death. Nevertheless as Shneidman (1970) noted with a subject pool of similar characteristics, these subjects collectively often represented the "cutting edge" of American trends and ideas. Thus, some cautious generalizations to American population trends in death concerns can be made.

The overall conclusion of this study suggested that environmental factors such as socialization (reflected in gender differences) and historical generational differences (cohort differences) are more important in adults than developmental changes in cognition and maturation in the formulation of death concerns. Further, albeit the use of self-report measures as useful indicators of death anxiety have been questioned (Kastenbaum and Costa, 1977), our results did show that subjects reported no death anxiety systematically related to maturation and aging (or nearness to death). The findings did seem to reflect an ambiguous attitude towards death in female adults, that is maintained by many individuals across the life span while

males tended to deny their death fears. These findings regarding death anxiety need to be examined further to ascertain its impact on how one deals with the questions of life and one's ability to handle one's own imminent death or that of a loved one. For example, do individuals who have the tendency to deny death fears, deal with death differently than those who are more open to their feelings about death? Other researchers have postulated a multilevel model of death anxiety (Feifel & Branscromb, 1973) and have argued that on an unconscious level death deniers are even more anxious than death fearers. But, this finding has not always been confirmed in the literature. For example, Fleming (1977) found no relationship between defensive responding on a perceptual recognition task and death anxiety. Obviously, more research is needed to resolve this issue of multidimensionality in death fears. What is required is a more reliable measure of underlying repressed anxiety such as can be given by a voice analyzer--a nonintrusive device capable of measuring levels of intensity, inflection and speech changes that occur as one speaks about death attitudes. Further, while no developmental or systematic changes in death concerns were found due to aging in this adult population, they may be experienced at the covert level. While cross-sectional studies are always limited in rendering causation across the life span, the difficulties are generally encountered when explicating differences in dependent variables. The fact that our study reflected so few systematic differences in apparent attitudes across the adult life span probably reflects that very few differences exist, at least, at the overt level. The question of multidimensional levels of death concerns and anxiety remains unanswered and needs further study.

APPENDIX I

Attitudes toward death

Which of the following most influenced your present attitudes toward death?

death of someone close	32.2%
specific reading	6.7%
religious upbringing	25.6%
introspection and meditation	17.8%
ritual (e.g. funerals)	2.2%
TV, radio or motion pictures	1.1%
longevity of my family	2.2%
my health or physical condition	5.6%
other (specify)	6.7%

How much of a role has religion played in the development of your attitude toward death?

a very significant role	33.3%
a rather significant role	18.9%
somewhat influential, but not a major role	23.3%
a relatively minor role	21.1%
no role at all	3.3%

To what extent do you believe in a life after death?

strongly believe in it	46.7%
tend to believe in it	22.2%
uncertain	13.3%
tend to doubt it	12.2%
convinced it does not exist	2.2%

Regardless of your belief about life after death, what is your wish about it?

I strongly wish there were a life after death	67.8%
Am indifferent as to whether there is a life after death	25.6%
I definitely prefer that there not be a life after death	4.4%

To what extent do you believe in reincarnation?

strongly believe in it	11.1%
tend to believe in it	18.9%
uncertain	15.6%
tend to doubt it	22.2%
convinced it cannot occur	26.7%

How often do you think about your own death?

very frequently (at least once daily)	2.2%
frequently	20.0%
occasionally	55.6%
rarely (no more than once a year)	12.2%
very rarely or never	8.9%

If you could choose, when would you die?

in youth	1.1%
in the middle prime of life	1.1%
just after the prime of life	11.1%
in old age	68.9%
never	17.8%

When do you believe that, in fact, you will die?

in youth	7.8%
in the middle prime of life	10.0%
just after the prime of life	78.9%
in old age	2.2%
never	1.1%

Has there been a time in your life when you wanted to die?

yes. Mainly because of great physical pain	5.6%
yes. Mainly because of great emotional pain	26.7%
yes. Mainly to escape an intolerable social or interpersonal situaiton	15.6%
yes. Mainly because of great embarrassment	4.4%
no	47.8%

To what extent do you believe that psychological factors can influence (or even cause) death?

I firmly believe they can	45.6%
I tend to believe that they can	31.1%
I am undecided or don't know	18.9%
I doubt that they can	1.1%
I firmly believe they can	2.2%

When you think of your own death, how do you feel?

fearful	13.3%
discouraged	3.3%
depressed	6.7%
purposeless	1.1%
resolved, in relation to life	34.4%
pleasure, in being alive	22.2%
other (specify)	16.7%

What is your present orientation to your own death?

death-seeker	0.0%
death-hastener	0.0%
death-acceptor	51.1%
death-welcomer	2.2%
death-postponer	32.2%
death-fearer	3.3%
other (specify)	1.1%

How often have you been in situations in which you seriously thought you might die?

many times	4.4%
several times	17.8%
once or twice	51.1%
never	25.6%

To what extent are you interested in having your image survive after your own death through your children, books, good works, etc.?

totally interested	15.6%
very interested	31.1%
somewhat interested	28.9%
not very interested	17.8%
totally uninterested	4.4%

For whom or what might you be willing to sacrifice your life?

for a loved one	62.2%
for an idea or moral principle	6.7%
in combat	2.2%
a grave emergency where a life could be saved	17.8%
not for any reason	3.3%

If you had a choice, what kind of death would you prefer?

tragic, violent death	28.9%
sudden but not violent death	53.3%
quiet, dignified death	3.3%
death in line of duty	12.2%
death after a great achievement	2.2%
suicide	0.0%
homicidal victim	0.0%
there is not "appropriate" kind of death	0.0%

If it were possible would you want to know the exact date on which you are going to die?

yes	13.3%
no	84.4%

If or when you are married, would you prefer to outlive your spouse?

yes. I would prefer to die second and outlive my spouse	20.0%
no. I would rather die first and have my spouse outlive me	17.8%
undecided or don't know	56.7%

How often have you seriously comtemplated committing suicide?

very often	4.4%
only once in a while	7.8%
very rarely	26.7%
never	60.0%

Have you ever actually attemtped suicide?

yes. With an actual very high probability of death
yes. With an actual moderate probability of death
yes. With an actual low probability of death
no.

Suppose that you were to commit suicide, what reason would most motivate you to do it?

to get ever or hurt someone	10.0%
fear of insanity	25.6%
physical illness or pain	6.7%
failure or disgrace	16.7%
loneliness or adbandonment	5.6%
death or loss of a loved one	2.2%
family strife	4.4%
atomic war	11.1%
other (specify)	17.8%

APPENDIX II

Male/Female Differences

Regardless of your belief about life after death, what is your wish about it?

	Males	Females
strongly wish there were a life after death	29	32
am indifferent as to whether there is life after death	11	12
definitley prefer that there not be a life after death	4	0

To what extent do you believe in reincarnation?

	Males	Females
strongly believe in it	2	8
tend to believe in it	5	12
uncertain	7	7
tend to doubt it	14	6
convinced it cannot occur	13	11
no response	4	0

What is your present orientation to your own death?

	Males	Females
death - seeker	0	0
death - hastener	0	0
death - accepter	26	20
death - welcomer	2	0
death - postponer	15	14
death fear	0	9
other (specify)	1	2

How often have you been in situations in which you seriously thought you might die?

	Males	Females
many times	4	0
several times	8	8
once or twice	19	27
never	13	10

To what extent are you interested in having your image survive after your own death through your children,m books, good works, etc.?

	Males	Females
totally interested	11	3
very interested	14	14
somewhat interested	11	15
not very interested	6	10
totally uninterested	1	3

Have you ever actually attempted suicide?

	Males	Females
yes. With an actual very high probability of death	1	0
yes. With an actual moderate probability of death	1	0
yes. With an actual low probability of death	0	5
no.	41	39

If or when you are married, would you prefer to outlive your spouse?

	Males	Females
yes. I would prefer to die second and outlive my spouse	6	12
no. I would rather die first and have my spouse outlive me	12	4
undecided or don't know	25	26

APPENDIX III

Age Differences

How much of a role has religion played in the development of your attitude toward death?

a. a very significant role
b. a rather significant role
c. somewhat influential, but not a major role
d. a relatively minor role
e. no role at all

	18-20	20-25	25-30	30-35	35-40	40-49	50-59	60-64	65+
a.	2	5	4		3	2	3	5	6
b.	3	1	1		1	5	3	1	2
c.	2	1	3	4	1	3	1	2	4
d.	2	3	2	6	4		2		
e.	1			1			1		

To what extent do you believe in a life after death?

a. strongly believe in it
b. tend to believe in it
c. uncertain
d. tend to doubt it
e. convinced it does not exist

	18-20	20-25	25-30	30-35	35-40	40-49	50-59	60-64	65+
a.	2	6	5	2	4	5	7	4	7
b.	3	2	3	3	1	3		2	3
c.	4		1	3		2	1		1
d.	1	2		3	2		2	1	
e.			1					1	

Regardless of your belief about life after death, what is your wish about it?

a. strongly wish there were a life after death
b. indifferent as to whether there is a life after death
c. definitely prefer that there not be a life after death

	18-20	20-25	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-49	50-59	60-64	65+
a.	7	8	8	3	4	8	8	6	9
b.	3	2	1	7	5	1	1	2	1
c.				1		1	1		1

When you think of your own death, how do you feel?

a. fearful
b. discouraged
c. depressed
d. purposeless
e. resolved, in relation to life
f. pleasure, in being alive
g. other (specify)

	18-20	20-25	25-30	30-35	35-40	40-49	50-59	60-64	65+
a.		2	1	4	1	3	1		
b.	2				1				
c.	1	2	1	1	1				
d.					1				
e.	2	3	4	2	1	3	5	4	7
f.		2	4	2	2	2	2	3	2
g.	5	1		1	2	2	2		2

How often have you been in situations in which you seriously thought you might die?

a. many times
b. several times
c. once or twice
d. never

	18-20	20-25	25-30	30-35	35-40	40-49	50-59	60-64	65+
a.			1	1			2		
b.		1	1	1		2	2	3	6
c.	7	8	4	6	6	7	6	1	1
d.	3	1	4	3	3	1		3	5

Have your attitudes toward death ever been affected by narcotic or hallucinogenic drugs?

a. yes
b. I have taken drugs but my attitudes toward death have never been affected by them
c. I have never taken drugs.

	18-20	20-25	25-30	30-35	35-40	40-49	50-59	60-64	65+
a.			1	1	1				
b.	2	7	5	6	2	2			
c.	8	3	4	4	5	8	10	8	12

APPENDIX IV

I. PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS IN OUR ATTITUDES OF DEATH QUESTIONNAIRE

Male - 50%
Female - 50%

Age	
UNDER 20	11.1%
20 - 24	11.1%
25 - 29	11.1%
30 - 34	12.2%
35 - 39	10.0%
40 - 49	11.1%
50 - 59	11.1%
60 - 64	8.9%
65 YEARS OR OLDER	13.3%

Marital Status	
single	30.0%
married once	42.2%
remarried	10.0%
separated	1.1%
divorced	4.4%
living with someone	4.4%
widow/widower	7.8%

Religious Background	
protestant (specify)	47.8%
roman catholic	32.2%
jewish	5.6%
other (specify)	13.3%

Political Preference	
republican	36.7%
independent	26.7%
democratic	25.6%
other (specify)	7.8%

Political Attitudes	
very liberal	13.3%
somewhat liberal	20.0%
moderate	34.4%
somewhat conservative	22.2%
very conservative	3.3%

Completed level of Education	
grade school	10.0%
high school graduate	22.2%
some college	30.0%
college graduate	10.0%
some graduate school	5.6%
master's degree	14.4%
Ph.D., M.D. or other advanced degree	4.4%

Annual Income	
less than $5000	8.9%
$5000 - 10000	4.4%
$10000 - 15000	14.4%
$15000 - 25000	20.0%
$25000 - 50000	34.4%
more than $50000	10.0%

Home Region	
west	1.1%
southwest and mountain states	4.4%
midwest	18.9%
south	2.2%
New England	31.1%
middle Atlantic	41.1%
other than U.S.	1.1%

Population of Home Town	
under 10000	41.1%
10000 - 50000	24.4%
50000 - 100000	7.8%
100000 - 500000	12.2%
500000 - 1000000	6.7%
over 1000000	2.2%

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